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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes an investigation of a specific set of findings from the Monitoring the Future project, an annual survey of the attitudes and values of high school seniors that has occurred since 1975. The findings investigated relate to indicators of anxiety among these students about the threat of nuclear war. The study developed two distinct constructs from combined items on the survey: nuclear concern and nuclear despair. Surprisingly, a very low correlation emerged between these two constructs. Nuclear concern correlated significantly with interest in government, political efficacy, concern about other social issues, opposition to unilateral disarmament and others; whereas nuclear despair correlated with low self-esteem, political alienation, acting out, and various indicators of poor mental health. The overall findings, discussed in detail, suggest that the construct of "nuclear anxiety," which does not clearly distinguish between concern and despair, is too complex and multivariate to furnish reliable political and mental health implications. However, the implications of the distinction between nuclear concern and despair are very important, both politically and psychologically. Three visual displays are included. (TE)

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Nuclear Despair and Nuclear Concern among U.S. High School Seniors and Recent Graduates

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Since 1975, the Monitoring the Future Project of the University of Michigan Survey Research Center has been reporting on the attitudes and values of high school seniors. Its yearly surveys are administered to samples of over 16,000 high school seniors per year. While the primary focus of the survey is drug use, attitudes relevant to this conference, such as political attitudes, trust in government, and nuclear anxiety are also assessed.

In 1982, the MtF report that over 30% of that years sample "worried often" about the threat of nuclear war received extensive publicity, and this finding has been cited extensively within the literature as a methodologically sound and compelling demonstration of the extent of nuclear anxiety. In 1984, Jerry Bachman, a primary investigator with MtF, became more interested in the concept of nuclear anxiety: What does it mean when people indicate on a survey that they worry often about the threat of nuclear war? We began investigating the correlates of this item, which we have come to call nuclear concern. At the same time, we began taking a closer look at alternate indicators of the concept of nuclear anxiety, particularly two contiguous items which define a construct we call nuclear despair. [See Table 1.]

We examined a large number of correlates of these constructs, the results of which are included in the book Milton Schwebel edited last year for the International Journal of Mental Health. I'll briefly summarize some findings from that article, and then proceed to new material.

Our first surprise was the spectacularly low correlation between these two constructs — r of about .03. This suggested to us that these may represent different aspects of nuclear anxiety, which has often been treated as a unitary construct. Confirming evidence for this view came from two sources: First, the two constructs show different patterns of trends over time: While nuclear concern rose precipitously throughout the late 70s and early 80s, peaking in 1982 and remaining strong, despair has shown only a meagre rise.

Second, the constructs show quite different patterns of correlations with other variables. Of over 300 variables examined, concern correlates significantly only with interest in government, political efficacy, concern about other social issues such as pollution and poverty, opposition to unilateral disarmament, and a handful of others. Despair, by contrast, correlates with low self-esteem, political alienation, acting out, and various indicators of poor mental health; many of these correspond to findings reported by Michael Newcomb (1986) last year.

A few findings stand out in this list. The first is the overall lack of correlation between either construct and most measures of political ideology or belief. An exception is support for unilateral disarmament, with which concern is negatively and despair positively correlated (or perhaps more tellingly, a lack of despair is associated with a lack of support for unilateral disarmament.) We concluded that the increase of concern detected during the early 80s was not a torrent of fear leading to a willingness to take any step to forestall nuclear war; rather it seems to reflect a recognition of the importance of the issue and its proper place on the public agenda. Among high school seniors, at least, liberals were neither especially more concerned nor despairing than conservatives.

The second finding is the lack of correlation between concern and any measure of mental health. If anything, concern — which we see as an appreciation of the importance of a problem — seems associated with <u>good</u> mental health. Despair —which we see as the expectation that one's self, family, nation, even species <u>will</u> perish in a nuclear war — <u>is</u> associated with mental health decrements, for reasons amply considered throughout the literature on nuclear anxiety. We believe that there is a lesson here, to which we will return in our conclusion: in the assessment of nuclear anxiety, it is critical to know which of these constructs — or others which may exist as well — is being tapped. Without such knowledge, it is difficult to know whether respondents are experiencing "healthy concern"

or "debilitating despair".

This point cannot be overstated: nuclear anxiety is in danger of becoming a misty and meaningless construct, and it seems that alternate language — whether ours or someone else's — which can deal more specifically with the construct should be adopted.

How we may distinguish between these constructs is as yet unclear. It could be that concern represents a cognitive, "cold" cognition about the possibility of nuclear war, while despair represents a more affectively laden, "hot" cognition — with some or all of the implications attending these terms. The works of Susan Fiske and others (1983), regarding people's cognitions related to nuclear war, are applicable here. Other compelling interpretations of the concern-despair distinction doubtless exist as well.

Along with its yearly sample of high school seniors, Monitoring the Future conducts a limited number of follow-up surveys with subsamples of each original cohort from 1976 onward. Nearly 1000 respondents from each cohort participate in each follow-up administration, although fewer than 200 answer the questions in any particular form. This means that we can make some preliminary extensions of the MTF findings into the years of young adulthood, using a cohort-sequential design. This design allows us to explore, and attempt to distinguish among, cohort, period, and age effects on these variables. [Tables 2 and 3 describe this procedure and the patterns which would indicate each effect.]

We'll begin with the better-known variable representing nuclear concern. [See Figure 1.] We initially find that a clear period effect emerges. The differences we have found with high school seniors do seem to reflect changes that are occurring among people of college age and beyond. By contrast, cohorts seem pretty consistent in their nuclear concern, although the class of 79 may be a bit more complacent than the rest. Plotting age of respondents against year of survey allows us to look at maturational effects; again, no clear effects seem evident.

Returning to period effects for a moment, one further interesting trend appears. If you recall, before 1979 or 1980, nuclear war did not appear to be on the public agenda. Examining this dataset, you see a rise up through 1980, after which you see the means begin to oscillate in odd and even years. (We should note here that half of the original sample is assessed in odd years and half in even, so that some oscillation on a 2 year cycle within cohorts is not unexpected.) Upon examination, we found that this was not due to pre-existing differences in the odd- and even-year samples mentioned previously. In fact, the effect is quite secular: for the ten cohorts which we can test between 1979 and 1986, there are 49 opportunities for a cohort's mean to increase in an even year and decrease in an odd one, and this in fact occurred 48 times.

We have a hard time explaining what this means. Perhaps more compelling reasons for nuclear concern occurred in the springs of 1980, '82, '84, and '86 than in '79, '81, '83, and '85. An obvious possibility is the effect of national elections, although Monitoring the Future collects its data in April of each year. The occurrence of elections could be exaggerated by a tendency within the media to highlight issues related to nuclear policy in election years, and this is consistent with the effect occurring only after 1979, at which time it seems to have become a major social and political issue. We compared the oscillation obtained on this item with results from a few other ones, and found only a weak tendency for people to report that they "think more about social issues" in the spring of election years, and found no oscillating pattern at all for reported worry about overpopulation.

A cohort-sequential analysis of the positively-worded despair variable yields different results. [See Figure 2] Looking first at period effects, we find a slow rise upward to 1982 and then downward, with slight indications of the same oscillating pattern observed with the concern variable. The effect is greatly attenuated, however, and is largely located in the first two cohorts. Differences between cohorts appear to be scant as well.

Now considering years since graduation, [Figure 3] we can see what seems to be a clear maturational effect: following high school and through the twenties, respondents express less nuclear despair. There is a sharp drop for the first two years out of high school, and a pretty consistent decrease thereafter, as evident from the cohort means. Our data seem reasonably strong through the mid-twenties, and within three years we should be able to make reasonably strong statements through age 28. These findings seem largely replicated for the negatively worded despair variable, which has been examined less extensively.

Researchers such as Chivian (1986), Goldenring and Doctor (1986), Solantus (1986), Tizard (1986), Raundalen and Finney (1986), Ardila (1986), and others have examined maturation effects on nuclear anxiety, noting that younger children fear and expect nuclear war more than do older children, older children more than adults, and so on. We draw three pertinent lessons from our data. First, to the extent that there is a downward trend in nuclear despair through high school, this suggests that that trend continues through the mid-20s, and then probably flattens out. Second, recall that — contrary to all of the above authors — we found no age effect for concern, providing us with another important distinction between these two constructs. Third, our data suggests that judgments made on the basis of high school or college students of how despairing people are about the nuclear threat probably overestimate the amount of despair in the older population — that is, the voting and policymaking population.

Why does this age effect occur? We note two explanations out of the many possibilities. First, it may be that people, as they leave high school, no longer have the luxury of bucking the common wisdom on these issues. They may find it necessary to suppress unpopularly gloomy views such as this in the workplace, or they may no longer have the time or energy to think about the problem, or nuclear despair may be incompatible

with the attitudes necessary to begin a career and family. For any or all of these reasons, with increasing age nuclear anxiety may begin to be denied. Certainly numerous authors have spoken to the motives and mechanisms for such a reaction.

A second, more charitable possibility, is that as they age people simply have more experience with not being blown up. They witness more international crises that sputter out without bringing forth the conflagration; they learn to take the sabre rattling of national leaders with a grain — or a fistful — of salt; they may come to accept that deterrence — the fact, if not the doctrine — seems to have kept them alive for a long time (though the credit due deterrence is not at all clear.) Irving Janis (1951) wrote in his initial study of reactions to aerial bombings that while "near misses" (those who had been injured, lost a loved one, or had their homes destroyed, by a bomb) became increasingly anxious about the bombings, "distant misses" (who had suffered no such tangible loss) became less anxious as the bombings went on. In a real sense, most Americans become "distant misses" as they mature, and this may be how people "grow out" of nuclear despair, if this indeed is growth.

We find, then, that there may be good reasons why what in 1982, at the height of the nuclear freeze movement, looked like a possible sea change in our national sentiment towards nuclear policy has stalled in the past five years. Interest in the issue of nuclear war, recognition of the threat, was not necessarily yoked to policy preferences, or even to a belief that present policies were terribly dangerous. (Somewhat dangerous, perhaps, but requiring less profound change than anti-nuclear activists would hope.) It was not that people were convinced that anti-nuclear activists were correct and then failed to act; rather it was that people were never entirely convinced in the first place. Beyond this, reports of widespread fear among children and teenagers did not reflect the greater complacence, justified or not, enjoyed by the more mature segments of the population.

If our analysis has tended towards that end of the spectrum which ascribes minimal effects to nuclear anxiety, we want to distinguish it from that of two other theorists who have made similar assertions, Adelson and Coles. Adelson (1985) has suggested that children are frightened by parents and teachers into nuclear anxiety, and that the studies which have found nuclear anxiety among children were fatally flawed. In truth, we found that nuclear concern was on the ascendent years before it became a hot political issue. Coles (1986) has suggested that nuclear anxiety is a luxury indulged in by students who need not worry about concrete problems such as racism and poverty. In truth, we found that nuclear despair was positively correlated with indicators of low socio-economic status.

We do not argue that nuclear anxiety is irrelevant; we argue that it is complex. It has multiple aspects, and at the risk of oversimplification, that aspect of it which predominates is not associated with harm, and that aspect which is associated with harm does not predominate. We recognize, at the same time, the superficiality of the survey instrument; beneath surface equanimity may lie latent despair which can only be assessed through the clinical interview. Recognition of this may be useful in reconciling many findings in this area. We argue, however, that the superficiality of the survey instrument is not necessarily a debit; if people are not, in their daily lives, confronted with the nuclear threat, if whatever defenses they have are allowed to stand 99% of the time, then the survey instrument which ignores their inner demons may provide a superior portrait of how they are when they watch the news, when they interact with friends and family, when they vote.

Our findings suggest that nuclear anxiety may have been overemphasized over the past few years, both in its political and mental health implications. Neither nuclear concern nor nuclear despair have any clear political implications that we can determine, save perhaps one: it seems likely that there is a threshold level of concern, which we currently exceed, below which the public is not willing to even think about the issue of nuclear war

— and to that extent only the activist may be grateful for nuclear concern. We find a similar story for mental health effects: the implicit assumption often made by researchers in this area that anxiety about the bomb is itself extremely debilitating is weakly supported. We have little evidence for the conclusion that nuclear anxiety causes direct psychic harm.

If the evidence does indeed point in this direction, than it is time that researchers in this field think for a while about the implications of this stunning lack of results. We expect that many people who have conducted research in this field did so in hopes of demonstrating that our nuclearism and militarization was doing to the mental and spiritual health of this nation what doctors have shown it doing to our physical health (e.g. Victor Sidel, 1986) and what economists such as Seymour Melman (198_) have shown it is doing to our economic health. Our feeling, which others may dispute, is that we have failed to do so. we am proud that so many people who as activists might have wanted to report devastating effects of nuclear anxiety have as scientists reported the facts as found. Do we now conclude that there are no mental health effects of life with the bomb? We don't think we should.

Preparations for nuclear war can have adverse mental health effects on the public via at least four channels. Effects could derive from:

1) an increase in anxiety regarding this threat;
2) intrapsychic cognitive or affective adaptations to anxiety generated by the nuclear threat, such as denial;
3) social, cultural, political or economic ramifications of militarization, caused in part by the nuclear threat, and
4) the prevention of actions which would reduce the likelihood of nuclear war, thus contributing to the occurrence of a war. This effect, of course, can have no present direct mental health impact.

These may be termed anxiety–, denial–, socially–, and policy-mediated effects. The first two of these may be referred to as direct effects of nuclear anxiety, while the latter two are indirect effects.

The anxiety-mediated effects of the nuclear threat require little elaboration; they might include lowered self-esteem, depression, political alienation, etc. Denial-mediated effects, as described by Diamond and Bachman (1986) would be almost impossible to demonstrate, for a number of reasons. First, it may be impossible to determine the objective risk of nuclear war which people are presumed to deny. Second, it may be impossible to distinguish those who struggle not to think about nuclear war and are forced to restrict their thoughts and activities to avoid the issue from those who honestly do not believe that a nuclear war is possible and are perfectly secure in their knowledge. Third, even if we hypothesize that, in the absence of the nuclear threat, people might be less materialistic or more humane, we have no satisfactory comparison group against which to measure them. Much more can be said about the possibility of denial-mediated effects of the nuclear threat, but the issue seems likely to be as much a morass as work on anxiety-mediated effects.

Socially-mediated effects are more likely to be demonstrable. At least two kinds of effects stand out. First are effects mediated through economics. We can make a strong case that the arms race diverts money that could otherwise be spent on health care, nutrition, AIDS research, housing, etc., and that the exacerbation of the problems which could otherwise be solved entails mental health impacts of the nuclear threat. Aside from funding priorities, Melman and others have noted the deleterious impact of nuclearization on the economy as a whole, especially compared to countries which spend a small proportion of their budget on the military, such as the FRG and Japan. We know something of the effects of unemployment, poverty, and illness of mental health, and can

recognize that a portion of it may be attributable to our response to the nuclear threat.

Socially-mediated effects could also arise in the political sphere. We can make a case (indeed, the present administration has made it for us) that the nuclear state is one perched on the precipice of martial law, in which the primacy of national security yields suspicion and secrecy at the highest levels. We can make a case that political alienation, abandonment of the rights and responsibilities of democracy, and the obliteration of moral values cited in the Bishops' pastoral letter (198_) on nuclear war are the fruits of nuclearism. From all of this is a short step to mental health impacts of the threat of nuclear war.

Policy-mediated effects are those mediated by nuclear war itself. Osgood (1962), White (1984), Lifton (1982), and countless others have demonstrated nicely that our reacting to the threat of nuclear war with an ever greater reliance on Peace Through Strength may well make such a war more likely. If nuclear anxiety leaves us so incapable of creatively finding ways out of the nuclear labyrinth that we die there, that in itself is the greatest possible mental health effect of the nuclear threat.

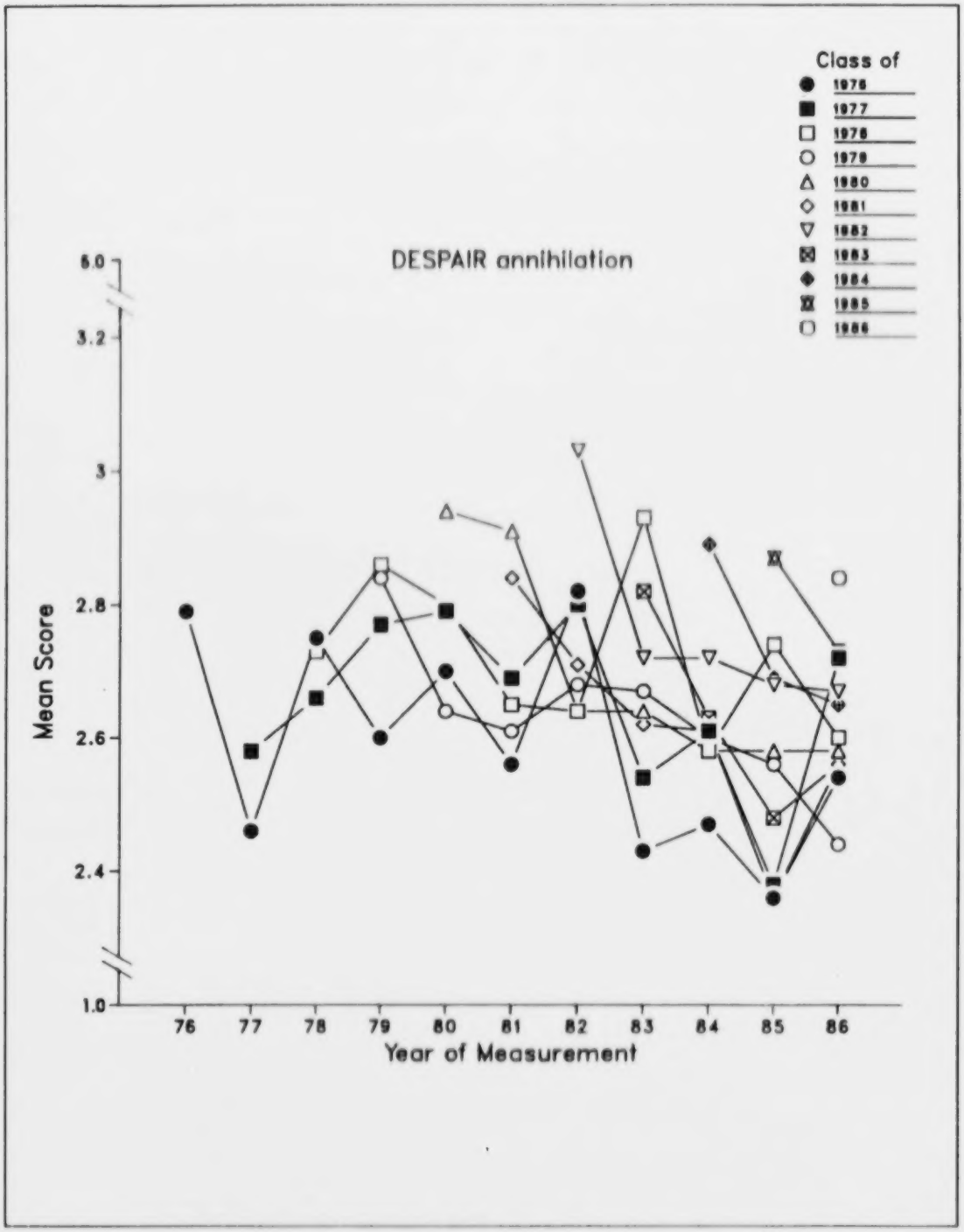
We want to raise a few subtle points about these latter, indirect channels for mental health impacts. First of all, they affect everyone. Unlike nuclear anxiety, the socially- and policy-mediated mental health impacts affect you whether or not you know about nuclear war, whether or not you're afraid of it, whether you personally favor unilateral disarmament, first strike, or anywhere in between. Psychologists have been accustomed to looking for mental health effects only among people who admit to nuclear anxiety, and as mentioned previously have never quite figured out what to do with people who might be denying it. With these latter effects, there is no such ambiguity.

The second difference between direct and indirect effects is that the latter carry with them clear policy prescriptions. If a policy is ruining the economy, sacrificing the public

health, undermining democracy, risking catastrophe, than a strong case is made for changing the policy. This is a message that both voters and political elites can understand.

If, by contrast, a policy is accused of giving children nightmares, it is likely that such a harm — real and tragic though it is — will not outweigh the presumed benefits of limiting Soviet expansion. National security policy simply cannot be made on the basis of whether children are afraid of a given threat. If it were, then children's fears of being overrun by Godless Communists would suffice to justify the destruction of the Soviet Union — or at least Nicaragua in the interim. It is also not clear to us that we can demonstrate that any fear of nuclear war is greater than the fear that Caspar Weinberger or Jeane Kirkpatrick might feel if the next President were poised to negotiate away all nuclear weapons. Fear, we suspect, is not the battleground on which to oppose nuclearism.

This does not mean peace psychologists should go out of business; we have more to fear than fear itself. We have at least these indirect channels by which our national response to the nuclear threat in turn threatens us, and any one of them potentially presents a more damning case against nuclearism than the corpus of work on nuclear anxiety. We don't want to imply that the continued study of nuclear anxiety is not important. It will be crucial for us to understand nuclear anxiety for us to see whether and how a case against nuclearism can be effectively made. As scientists, we are very interested in how we may distinguish between nuclear concern and despair, and the implications of such a distinction. But too great a part of our psychological resources have gone to a study of nuclear anxiety, for what appears to be the wrong reasons. As activists interested in "action to prevent war and build peace for a nuclear age", to cite the title of this panel, we must not delude ourselves that the poignant fears of children will change the minds of those who place their faith in the Bomb.


DESPAIR annihilation
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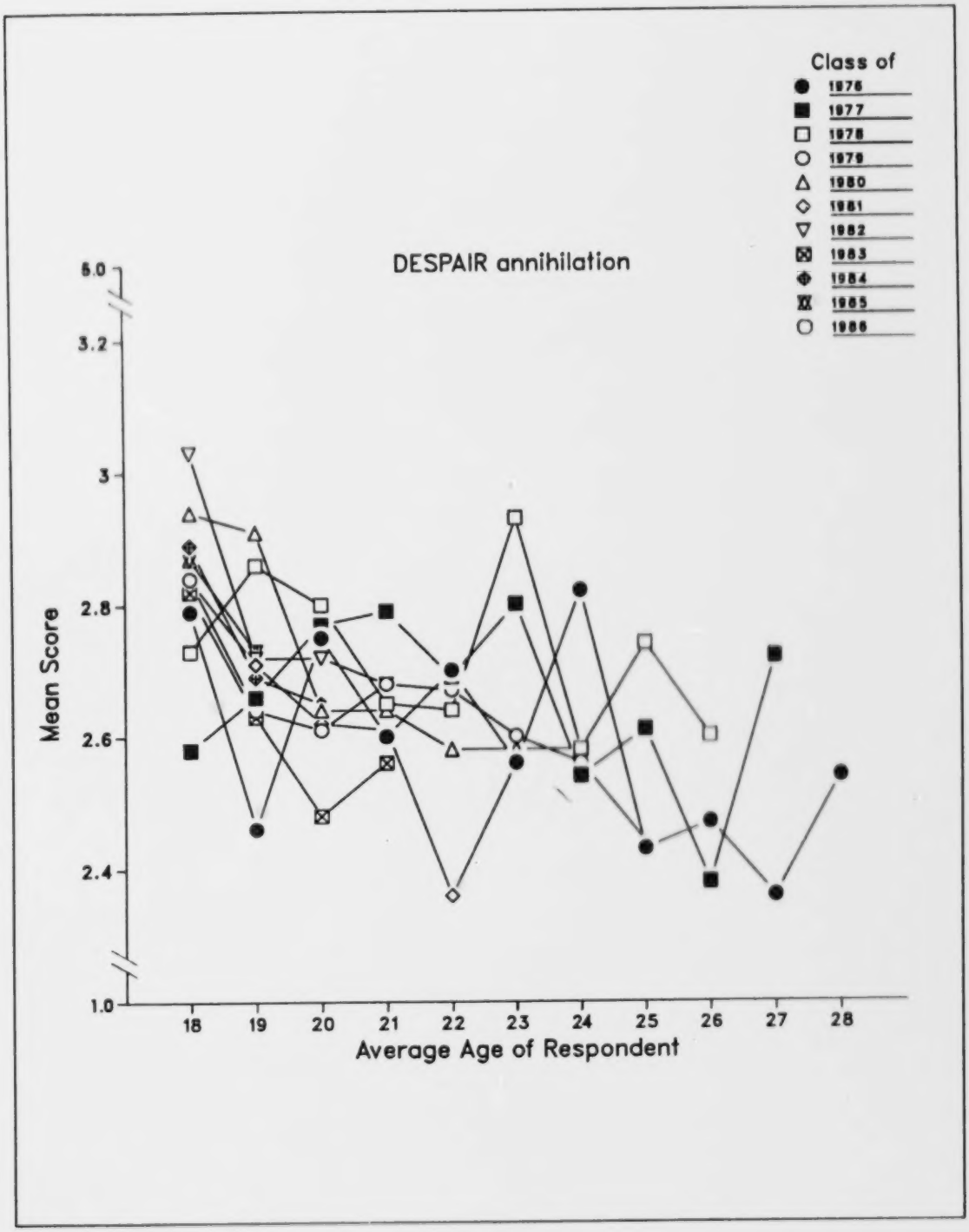
DESPAIR annihilation
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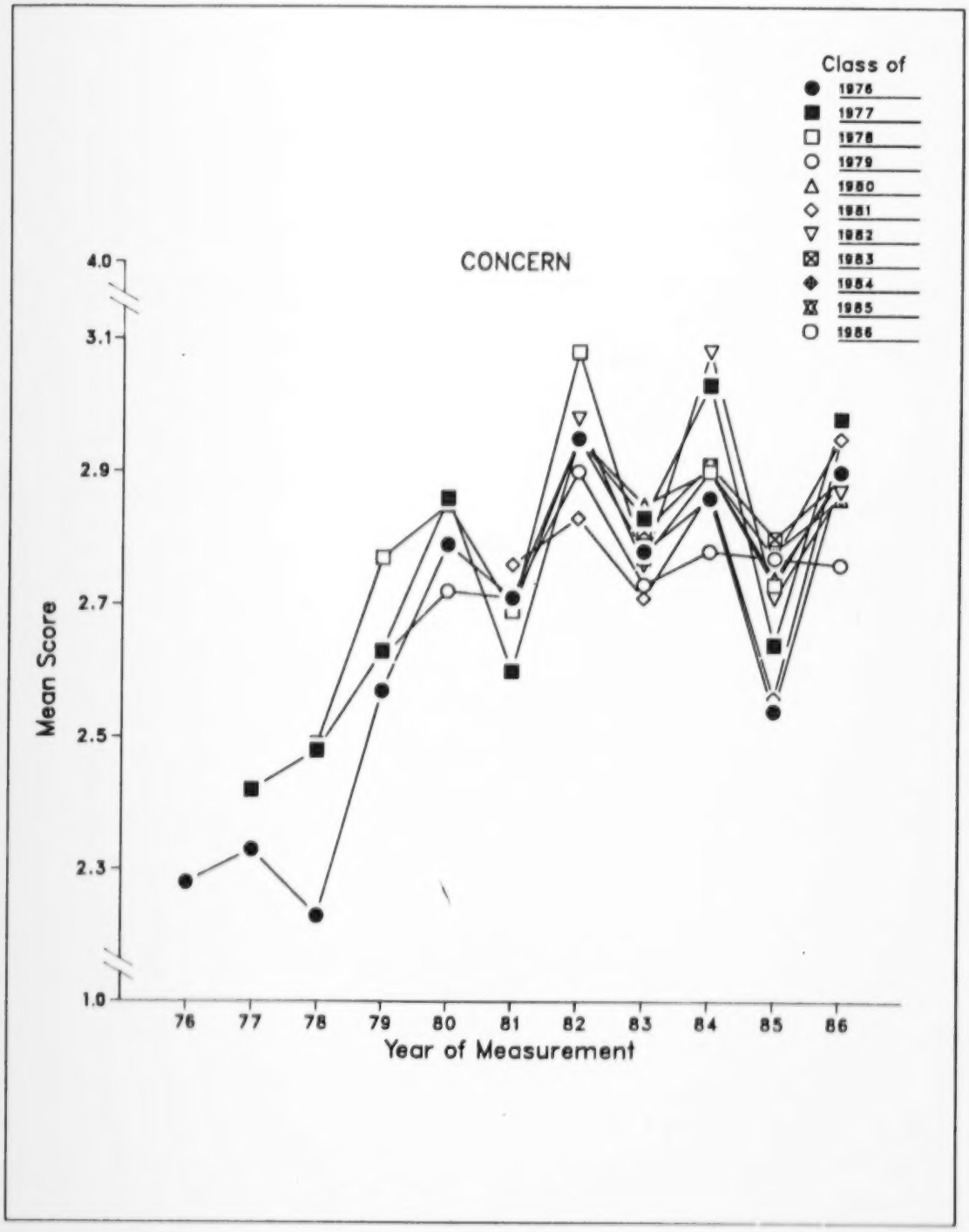
CONCERN
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